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Hostage's Wife Got 'Real Valentine's Day Present'

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Lucille (Sis) Levin got what she called "a real Valentine's Day present" before dawn yesterday when she learned that her husband, kidnaped in Beirut nearly a year ago, was free and on his way home.

The sudden reappearance of Jeremy Levin, Beirut bureau chief for Cable News Network, took U.S. officials by surprise, according to State Department sources, who said there had been no secret deal to obtain his release.

The officials said they learned of the development from the news media.

While the circumstances were unclear, the officials speculated that Levin may have been "allowed to escape."

Intensified pressure from a number of countries and private citizens following recent threats that a handful of Americans being held hostage in Lebanon would be tried as spies may have moved Levin's captors to release him, the sources suggested.

Among those contributing to this pressure were the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson and former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, they said.

The Syrian government reportedly claimed credit for negotiating Levin's release, but Levin was quoted as saying he escaped from his captors Wednesday night.

Meanwhile, a caller claiming to represent the terrorist group Islamic Jihad (Islamic Holy War) told a western news agency that the group had released Levin "after many approaches by some brotherly and effective sides."

"We can't say to what degree any particular government or governments . . . or any particular prayer or prayers" resulted in Levin's being free, a senior State Department official said in a background briefing for reporters. "Whatever worked,

let's hope it keeps working" for the four Americans still being held hostage.

Levin's wife, accompanied by her daughter, two sons, two friends and a State Department representative, left Andrews Air Force Base last night in a military jet made available by the White House. The plane was headed for Frankfurt, officials said.

CNN, meanwhile, dispatched a correspondent via charter jet from Rome to Damascus to pick up Levin and take him to his wife, a network

spokesman said. The reunion could occur within the next 24 hours, a State Department official said yesterday afternoon.

Shortly after news of Levin's return to freedom, a photograph of him and a message to his wife were relayed to the Levins' Northwest Washington home.

"Hello my dearest wife. I am O.K.," said the message, passed on by a French news service. "God willing I will be with you soon. Give my love to our family."

The photo of Levin, 51, reportedly was taken early yesterday shortly after he showed up at a Syrian army installation near Baalbek in eastern Lebanon.

"He looks beautiful" though "a little bewildered," Sis Levin said of the photo, which showed her husband in front of a portrait of Syrian President Hafez Assad.

The message and the photo were transmitted by the news agency Agence France-Presse.

After being informed around 5 a.m. that her husband apparently had escaped, Levin appeared on

NBC's "Today" show and said she was more inclined to believe he had been released than that he had escaped. "I don't think that's what happened," she said. "I think this is a message from the Middle East, a desire for peace . . . It'd be awfully strange for him to escape after being held for a year, but these things have happened before, and it

may be their way of making a gesture."

Later, she and Jackson appeared at a news conference to announce that the Syrian ambassador had assured them that Levin will be returned safely.

Jackson had left Howard University Hospital, where he was treated for pneumonia, to attend the news conference, reportedly after Sis Levin called him.

He said of Levin's release: "We ought to seize the opportunity to broaden the base of dialogue."

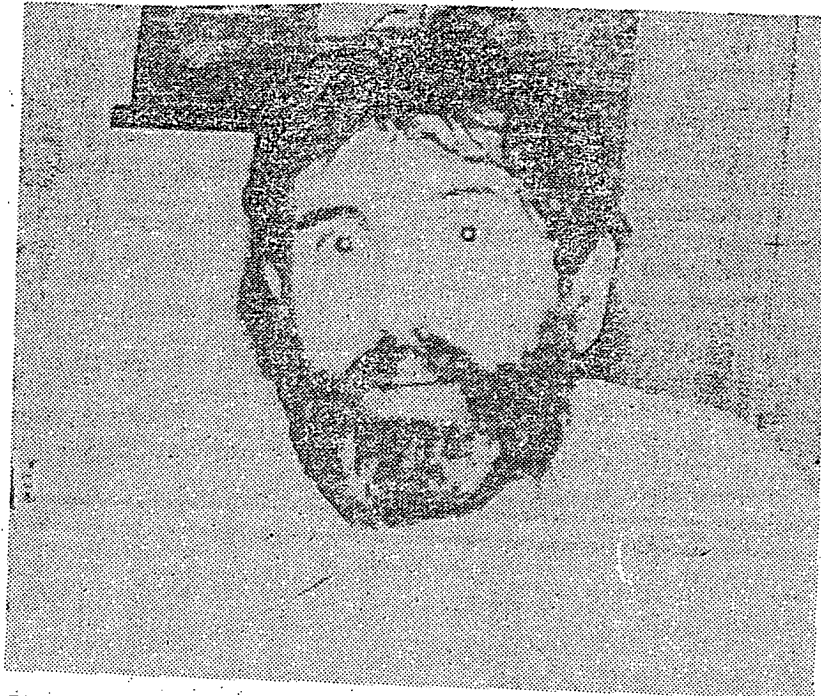
A year ago, Jackson was instrumental in the release of a Navy flier downed in Lebanon and taken into Syrian custody.

He has vowed to use his good relations with the Syrians to work for the release of the other Americans missing or kidnaped in Moslem-dominated West Beirut in the last year.

They are William Buckley, a U.S. diplomat who appeared in a tape that surfaced last month; the Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister; Peter Kilburn, a librarian at the American University of Beirut, and the Rev. Lawrence Jenco, who headed the Catholic Relief Service office in Beirut.

John Jenco of Joliet, Ill., brother of the priest, called the news of Levin's release "fantastic . . . Back here in Joliet, we're quite elated. It gives us hope that the other captives will be released soon."

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Photograph of Jeremy Levin taken at Syrian army installation near Baalbek.

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